

Alt Country, Old Country and New Country by Peter Stone Brown

Now way back in 1966, Bob Dylan at the suggestion of his producer decided to record in Nashville. The result of course was *Blonde On Blonde*, which actually was a lot closer to what was coming out of Memphis in the structure of the songs and the sound than it was to the country and western sounds of Nashville. That didn't stop lots of musicians and record companies from also going to Nashville. Vanguard Records for instance sent almost every artist on the label whether their music fit or not (it usually didn't) and soon there were lots of albums with either Nashville or Country in the title.

Two years later The Byrds decided to go to Nashville. Now The Byrds had some country roots. Roger McGuinn played the banjo, bassist Chris Hillman started out in a bluegrass band, and new member Gram Parsons who actually started out as one of them folksinger types but soon switched over to country had a pretty good country-western band happening, The International Submarine Band.

Now right around the same time, The Band released *Music From Big Pink*, and probably because they looked like 19th Century Outlaws and their song "The Weight" had that "take a load off fanny" chorus, and maybe because they covered "Long Black Veil" and lived in the country, they too were sometimes called country.

In any case this is how Country Rock was born, and soon all kinds of bands were either going country or breaking up and going country and living in the country, and singing songs about pickin' and grinning and living in the country and how cool country and the country was.

Now, of course this whole notion of country rock was kind of ridiculous to begin with because what were Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash, and the Everly Brothers and of course Elvis if they weren't country rock? But then the people at record companies didn't think about that 'cause it's easier to stick a label on something and pretend it's new.

Now fast-forward about 20 years and a whole lotta stuff had happened in-between. Country rock had kind of been forgotten about right quick though Gram Parsons did emerge as the great eternal country rock angel martyr, leaving Emmylou Harris to carry the torch. The record business itself was taken over by accountants and lawyers who cared less about music, and proceeded to turn it into the mess it is today. Another thing that happened was a lot of people woke up and realized that there already were plenty of country singers and that Merle Haggard singing Merle Haggard might even be better than Gram Parsons singing Merle Haggard.

Then country music which always was prone to following any trend got all mired up in the Outlaw Movement, which had everyone writing songs about what outlaws they were and then later, things really get messed up when John Travolta and *Urban Cowboy* came along with all that mechanical bull stuff. In the mid-'80s things got saved briefly by Dwight Yoakam and Steve Earle. Yoakam pretty much resurrected what country was supposed to be and Earle kind of picked up where Parsons left off. His *Guitar Town* was the perfect merger of country and rock. But Earle soon decided he wanted to be Bruce Springsteen or maybe a metal band or maybe both, and Yoakam kind of got lost inside his cowboy hat.

Into this mess in 1989 came **Uncle Tupelo** who I guess in the parlance of the times were an "alternative" band whatever that means. Actually they were an alternative country band, or so they would be referred to later. In fact Uncle Tupelo would become the founders of "Alternative Country," whatever that means. Uncle Tupelo recorded a couple of albums for an indie, got signed by a major, recorded a couple of more albums and broke up. Now as a prelude to reissuing all their albums is *An Anthology 89/93: An Anthology* (Columbia/Legacy). Uncle Tupelo was led by two songwriters, Jay Farrar and Jeff Tweedy. Farrar and Tweedy paid attention to the music that came before – all of it: folk music, country music, rock and roll, punk rock. The album opens with a straightforward cover of the Carter Family's "No Depression," except there's something in Farrar's voice that makes you think the depression he's singing about may not be solely economic. That feeling of depression or angst comes through often in the songs of both Farrar and Tweedy (while both are credited on the original songs, they now admit they actually wrote them separately, so who is singing lead much like The Beatles is really the songwriter). Looking back, what they did on one level is quite interesting: kids who grew up in the Reagan '80s writing about it and making it sound like country music of the 30s and 40s, but often using language of the '80s and '90s.

They often mix it up with thrash rock and sometimes vice versa. The previously unreleased cover of Iggy Pop's "I Wanna Be Your Dog" is done in a country style that combines Neil Young, Johnny Cash and a bunch of other influences.

They veer back and forth between various styles, often using hard electric guitars to emphasize an emotion. It doesn't always work and there's times when you wish they'd stay with a straight acoustic setting, except it's obvious that they're having fun rocking out – and when fun comes through on a record, that's an accomplishment.

Sequenced chronologically, you can hear them grow as songwriters both lyrically and melodically. If there's a problem with the songs, it's that at

times the lyrics are not quite fulfilled. At the same time there's a genuine sincerity in the vocals that overrides lyrical inadequacies.

Uncle Tupelo's choice of covers on this retrospective includes a very good version of John Fogarty's "Effigy" and the traditional folk song, "Moonshiner," which would be a standout if Bob Dylan hadn't recorded it. Dylan's 1963 recording of this finally released on *The Bootleg Series* is one of his greatest vocal performances – the one I use to shut up anyone who says he can't sing, and while Jay Farrar does a good job, he can't come close.

James Talley had 15 minutes of fame in 1977, when Jimmy Carter said he was his favorite songwriter and had him play his inauguration, while everyone else who listened to songwriters said, "who!?" Talley had recorded a few albums for Capitol and was a pretty good C&W songwriter, but by the '80s was selling real estate (quite successfully apparently) in Nashville.

His new *Touchstones* (Cimarron Records) are re-recordings of the best of those songs since Talley has been unable to get Capitol to re-release them or give him the rights to the albums. Esteemed writer Peter Guralnick's liner notes would have you believe that Talley is the second coming of Hank Williams and Woody Guthrie rolled into one and perhaps better than both. T'ain't so. Talley's a good craftsman and at times a likeable singer.

Recorded in San Antonio, he's backed by some of the finest session musicians in Texas, and occasional guests like Joe Ely. The recording is clean – at times *too clean* and the playing though excellent at times is a bit too slick. Talley's relaxed vocal style works best when things get a bit funky as on "Bluesman" and especially, "Nothin' But The Blues," but he can also be sappy, on "Sometimes (I Think About Suzanne) and "Not Even When It's Over."

Like many country singers, Talley sings about other country singers, in this case a tribute to one of the original Western Swing bands, "W. Lee O'Daniel And The Light Crust Doughboys." It's not a bad song and they've worked up a good western swing arrangement with Ely dueting on the vocals highlighted by Bobby Flores' fiddle, but I'd rather just listen to the Light Crust Doughboys instead of hear Talley sing about them.

Talley's skills as a songwriter are quite clear on the autobiographical "Richland Washington." With a Guthrie-esque simplicity (in fact he pays tribute to Guthrie by referencing his songs subtly in the lyrics) he talks about his father working at the Hanford (plutonium plant) and ends the song by saying how his kids have to ask who their grandfather was.

This same eloquent economy of lyrics is displayed in the closing song, "Give My Love To Marie," which is about a miner dying of black lung disease.

Too often however, Talley wraps his lyrics in melodies so laid back, that the anger that actually is there just doesn't emerge in a way that grabs you.

Jim Lauderdale first appeared in 1991 with a strange but interesting release *Planet of Love* that was particularly notable for a great tribute to George Jones, "King of Broken Hearts." Lauderdale can be a great singer – he's worked in theater in musicals and though he's had tons of songs recorded by other country artists, he refuses to stick to any one mold.

He's defiantly adventurous as his new *The Hummingbirds* (Dualtone) proves, but too often his quirkiness and experimentation come off as showy more than anything else. You want to like him, but the feeling that this is country via Broadway creeps in a little too much. There's a Nashville slickness to the playing that robs the music of its heart and ends up annoying.

The heart that is missing on *The Hummingbirds* is there in abundance on *Lost In The Lonesome Pines*, (Dualtone) Lauderdale's second collaboration with **Ralph Stanley and The Clinch Mountain Boys**. All the songs (except one Bill Monroe song) were written by Lauderdale (sometimes in collaboration with other writers). The title track sounds like it's 70 years old, in other words a classic.

Ralph Stanley of course is one of the scariest singers in the universe, and every time he opens his mouth he gives this disc authenticity. When he answers Lauderdale on the gospel "Zacchaues," he goes right up your spine. The same thing happens on "She Would Not Tell Her More" which also features standout mandolin work by John Rigsby, and the true highlight of the album, "Oh Soul."

There are several bluegrass gospel numbers, all of them excellent. The closing track, the a cappella, "Listen To The Shepherd," with Stanley leading is perfect.

It's easy to understand, even sympathize with Lauderdale's desire to write, sing and expand the limits of commercial Country & Western music. But his love of bluegrass and more traditional honky-tonk is so obvious, and he's so good at it, that it makes his other work seem frivolous in comparison.

